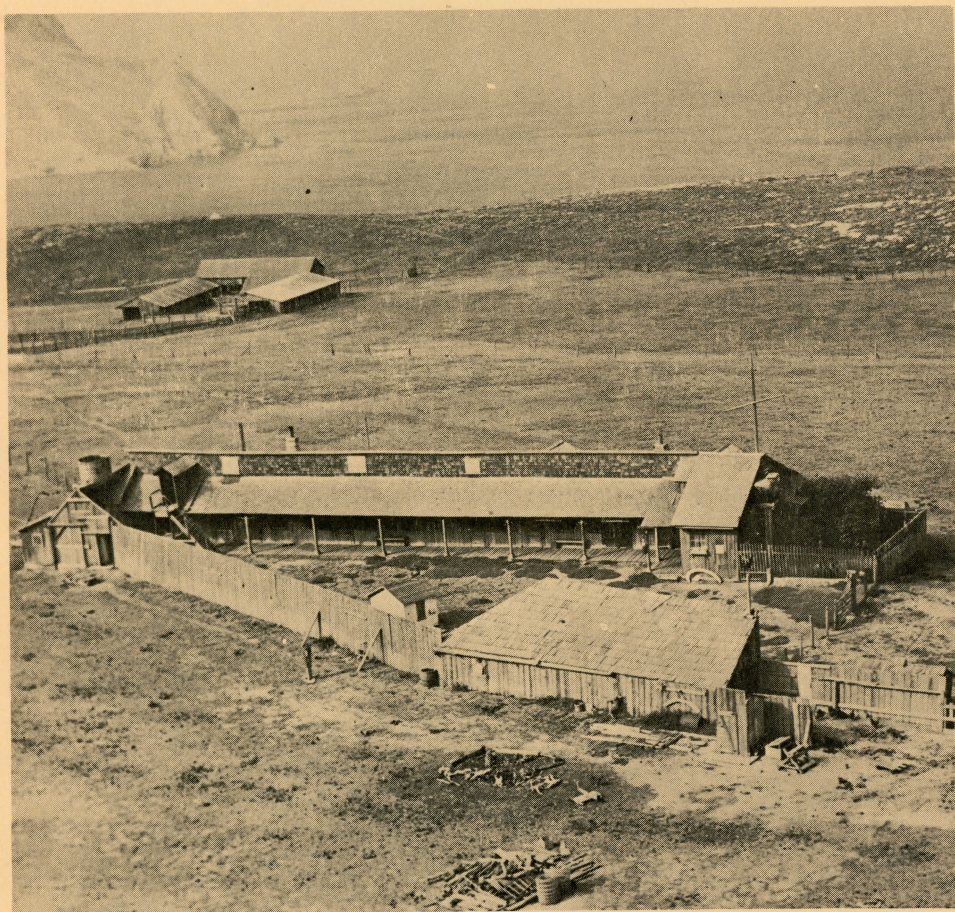


NOTICIAS



Barracks-like house John Russell built, with farm buildings and Cuyler's Harbor

*San Miguel Island "Crookery"**

By WHITNEY T. GENNS

To begin with, during the course of publishing Elizabeth Sherman Lester's *The Legendary King of San Miguel: The Lesters of Rancho Rambouillet*, I realized that much would have to be sacrificed in order to sum up the high-lights of daily life on San Miguel Island. There was enough good material for several books, and at this time I am borrowing from the unpublished portions of her notes to elaborate upon one of the most confusing, confining and confounding chores faced by the Lesters, every day—that of concocting three meals a day for themselves, guests and the sheepshearers, out of very limited irregular and monotonous stores. Mrs. Lester once confided that she practiced "crookery," not cookery, for she stole every idea she could to adapt for their needs in their primitive and isolated state, so I am also borrowing her apt title for this additional occasion.

In the beginning there was lamb, and then more lamb. Lamb to roast, lamb to broil, lamb to stew and to make ragout. No matter what one did with lamb it still tasted like lamb. Whether one curried it or buried it in Hot Sauce or stuffed it with dressing, or roasted its eyes, or broiled its tails, or dredged its shanks, or disguised it as "Mountain Oysters." One learned first to remove its tell-tell suet which quickly became tallow, when cold, and supplant it with some other anointment: olive oil, bacon grease, sausage fat—anything except lamb fat, for lamb.

But the sheepshearers loved their greasy food—their favourite stew swam in grease which they sopped with hard bread, or biscuits or corn-bread, so the greatest obstacle to overcome when cooking for the crew was to rearrange the grease factor so that it appeared in their concoctions and disappeared in the Lester's fare. To simplify this arduous process during shearing time, all lamb concoctions were skimmed of their excess fats, and the skimmings were used to make a dreadful dish which the shearers loved and the Lesters let alone, this being a hot sauce. Compounded of rendered lamb fat, chopped onions, crushed dried chili peppers, canned tomatoes and several dashes of every condiment on hand, this defied any nationality for it had to be served piping hot, because of its greasy content, and once laced over food, so nearly disguised the original flavor it became a splendid mask for leftovers, if one had the constitution for it. The rice left from curried lamb and rice could immediately become Spanish Rice. Red beans, otherwise basking in the broth from bacon rind, onions and garlic, promptly became Chili Beans.

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If one had the heart to completely ruin this sauce by chilling it and skimming off the grease, one could make a very passable Chutney by adding some chopped dried fruits—particularly prunes, peaches, and apricots.

On the rare occasions when such luxuries as canned pineapple and other tropical fruits were available in sufficient quantity to allow for dabbling with, some might be allowed in the Chutney, but these were otherwise reserved for fruit cocktails, desserts, jelly or sauces for the myriad varieties of puddings assembled from odds and ends of bread, cornmeal, rice, potatoes, carrots, squash, bananas, and the whole thing tied into a muslin sack and either boiled or steamed into servitude.

The business of sauces, about the only thing aside from desserts one could get frivolous with, broadened from the original Hot Sauce/Chutney combination to the "King's" favourite Sauce Bernaise. Instead of the required eggs and butter added at the last, the "King" learned to be quite satisfied with a judicious amount of margarine, canned milk and some cornstarch for thickness. Probably the most successful of all the sauces was the one known as the "Queen's." This started with pan drippings and flour, browned and enough hot water to make a paste; then one added a spoon or so of brown sugar or maple syrup, honey, or anything else sweet. A sprinkle of salt and sage or similar herb; then more hot water and perhaps some broth or some red wine to make the required amount of liquid for the sauce. This rather piquant concoction was good on anything and, when added to leftover lamb for hash, was a superb blender.

Chicken eggs, purchased by the crate, were reserved for delicate recipes with little seasoning to disguise the flavor, and also for breakfasts. Otherwise, the eggs from "Mother Goose," a holiday present to the children from George Knowlton, were relied upon. (Such eggs are extremely mucous and impossible to whip lightly, but for bulk and texture they are superb where their use is restricted to "binding ingredients.") The eggs of sea birds, regularly brought to the Island by Robert Ord, were used extravagantly in any recipe requiring spices and condiments. These eggs, small like those of the bantam or quail and thin-shelled, made up a large portion of the egg consumption when the crated eggs ran out.

Whether in New England or on San Miguel, Friday was "fish day." If, by some happenstance of weather, fresh fish did not appear, courtesy of the friendly fishermen, who were glad to exchange their ware for something else—almost anything else, if it were hot and ready to eat—Friday became "mock fish" day. Mock fish came to the table in various forms: creamy macaroni and cheese, clam fritters with bacon, salmon loaf, fish and potato croquettes, Welsh Rarebit with sardines or Cheese Fondue. This erratic departure in diet only prevailed in the absence of the sheep-shearers, who would have none of this wispy fare. If they could not gnaw it, crunch it, or let it linger savoringly and scorchingly on their tongues, it was not suitable fare.

When supplies did arrive, by whatever means, and a new complement of stores temporarily vanquished that old devil fear of inadequate diet, the "Queen" was to be found in the pantry and drying room where she carefully sorted out the perishables from the staples and stored each in its own province. Large crocks with tight-fitting lids held the ingredients of future delights, safe from the gluttony of rodents. Ample tables in the drying room were used to spread out the vegetables and fruits, which must be checked and turned regularly to avoid spoilage. The meats hung in their own department and were almost exclusively the province of the "King," an excellent butcher and curer.

As the citrus fruits were used, their rinds were dried, candied, and turned into another delicacy. Grated orange and lemon rind, sugared into a tincture, were used in place of vanilla when possible, for syrup base and for punch. Candied peel relieved the absense of formerly enjoyed confections, and was an addition to the fruit cakes and puddings. Added to raisins and nuts and blended with honey, candied peel made a toothsome spread for "tea sandwiches" and for cake fillings, or Banbury Tarts.

The "Queen of San Miguel," under the firm and gentle tutelage of the "King," earned her honors from the day she stepped forth into the kitchen of Rancho Rambouillet and faced a bewildering set of circumstances, a crew of hungry strangers and the distinct feeling that she was on stage with an act she hadn't rehearsed. Whether it was truly cookery or "crookery" that won her applause as she built her fumbling experiences, she, with her modest skill and tremendous enthusiasm, made the kitchen of the old ranch a warm, hospitable and memorable place to be—almost exclusively for men—a rare tribute from a rare breed.